For those whose seizures are well controlled, safety in the home may be no more of an issue than for anyone else. But when seizures are a regular occurrence it can be wise to consider extra safety measures that will minimise risks at home.

When we are at home we tend to relax and are less alert. In 2004, a European study showed that people with epilepsy have a seven per cent chance of an injury in the home while for others the risk is three per cent. Further studies have shown that for people with epilepsy the majority of burns happen while cooking, ironing, blow-drying hair and bathing.

Social worker Sally Garrett-Smith looks at some basic safety measures around the home while Epilepsy Society's Lukasz Abramowicz investigates personal safety alarms.

Safety in the home

It is the simple everyday activities that we take for granted that can put anyone with seizures at risk of injury. Bathing, cooking, carrying a cup of coffee from one room to another – even sleeping in a warm, comfortable bed can pose certain risks if you have asleep seizures.

For anyone with epilepsy, singing in the bath takes on a greater significance, while microwaving dinner may be more than a shortcut to a quick meal. Locked doors can spell untold danger. Tales of people having seizures in the bathroom and falling against the locked door are all too common. Injuries sustained by those who fall on hard wooden floors are all too visible.

We all want to feel safe and confident within our own homes. We want to be able to relax and unwind in our own independent space while enjoying an expected amount of privacy.

The following safety advice is designed to help make your home safer. It may not all be relevant to your particular circumstances but will hopefully help you to identify the most appropriate safety measures for you.

AROUND THE HOME

Stairs
Stairs can pose certain dangers if you have seizures. If you are worried you may fall down the stairs, it is wise – as far as is practical – to minimise the number of times you use them during the day. Some people who are concerned about falling from top to bottom in the event of a seizure on the landing choose to fit a stair gate. Placing a non-slip rug at the foot of the stairs can also help reduce the impact should you fall.

Asking someone else to assist you on the staircase can pose a risk to that person. If you fall you may hurt them, making it difficult for them to access help on your behalf if necessary. Handrails on the staircase may be useful, however. If you have seizures frequently, you may like to consider going upstairs on hands and knees and coming down on your bottom, so minimising risk of a fall.

Fires and radiators
If you have an open fire it is recommended that you use a fireguard that can be securely fixed to the ground to stop you falling into the fire. Covers or a large towel...
are recommended for radiators and lagging for exposed pipes.

Use thermostatic controls to keep the temperature on your radiators at a low, safe level, minimising the risk of burns should you fall against them. Placing a piece of furniture such as a table or sofa in front of a radiator can create a barrier and save you from potential harm.

Floors and upholstery
When choosing flooring and furnishings you might wish to think about your risk of injury should you fall against them. Try to avoid hard surfaces such as ceramic tiles, rough carpets which could result in friction burns, rugs that slip and loose stair carpet fittings. Non-slip flooring, cushioned floor covering and carpet may help reduce risk.

Fitting protective covers over the corners of furniture or using round tables may help you avoid injury should you fall against them. Protective corners are available from many high street shops.

Doors and windows
Toughened safety glass is designed to be hard to break or to hold together if it is broken. It may be worth checking if your doors and windows have been fitted with safety glass and, if not, to consider fitting it. An alternative is to use safety glass film which prevents the glass shattering if it is broken. This is available from DIY or hardware stores.

Rounded door handles may be less likely to cause injury should you fall against them. Fitting double-hinged doors that can open both in and out in the event of an emergency may be a sensible precaution. People who tend to wander during a seizure often choose to install double locks on external doors.

Electrical appliances
Wherever possible, use cordless equipment with automatic cut-outs. It is better to use additional power sockets rather than to run extension cables and multipoint plugs. Kettles, irons, hairdryers and DIY tools can be dropped during a seizure causing serious burns, scalds, injuries and fires. If possible it is best to avoid using these appliances if you have seizures, or make sure you have someone with you when you do.

Storing medication
Keep medication securely out of reach of young children. You might like to keep your tablets in a drug wallet or dispensing box, available from your local pharmacy or www.epilepsysociety.org.uk/shop

You could use your mobile phone to set an alarm to remind you to take your medication. Make sure that old medications are disposed of safely by returning them to your local pharmacy.

Lighting
Make sure you have adequate lighting, especially at night if seizures cause you to get up and wander around. Night lights give low level lighting and can be plugged directly into sockets.

Sensor lights are an option as they automatically turn on when they sense movement.

Fire safety
Install a smoke detector and fire alarm. Contact your local fire service for free smoke detectors and a home visit about fire awareness. If you have seizures it is worth assessing the risks of smoking indoors. Having a seizure while smoking could cause a fire or a nasty burn.

ROOM BY ROOM

Bedroom
It may be useful to remove unnecessary furniture from the bedroom to reduce the number of obstacles that may cause injury. Consider using a bed seizure alarm (see overleaf) and having a telephone next to your bed in case you need to call anyone in an emergency.

Choose a bed without a hard frame, a divan type bed with a
padded headboard will reduce injury. If you are worried about falling out of bed, sleep on a mattress on the floor. A futon may be an option. Avoid soft feather pillows which increase the risk of suffocation. Breathable safety pillows are available from www.sleep-safe.co.uk

Wheat heatable beanbags are recommended instead of hot water bottles. The beanbags can be heated in the microwave, reducing the risk of burns from hot water (beanbags are available from your local pharmacy). If using an electric blanket, remember to turn it off before going to bed.

Kitchen
It is safer to heat food in a microwave rather than a conventional oven as this will reduce risk of burns. When heating or cooking foods, a microwave doesn’t get hot to the touch so you are unlikely to burn yourself if you should touch it during a seizure. Microwaves also switch off automatically when the food is cooked so there is less chance of food burning or a fire starting if you leave it unattended.

If you’re making a hot drink there are several options:
– Use a microwave as above to heat the water
– Use a kettle tipper with your kettle. Disabled Living Foundation has information about these and other safety products (see overleaf)
– Use a one-cup hot water dispenser (www.argos.co.uk)
– Use a small hot water urn (www.hygiencesuppliesdirect.com)

When transferring hot liquids and foods from the microwave or cooker, use a trolley rather than carrying them. Think about using shatterproof crockery to reduce the risk of injury from sharp edges if broken.

If you are using a cooker make sure the heat can be quickly controlled. Use the back hot plates rather than the front ones and turn the saucepan handles outwards to the side of the hot plates.

Grilling food is safer than frying (avoid eye level grills). Health grills with a time control are a safer option (from mainstream stores such as Argos). If you are boiling vegetables in a saucepan, use a cooking basket as this can be lifted out and drained, avoiding potential burns and scalds from carrying saucepans with boiling water.

If you are worried about knives, consider using a manual or electric chopper to chop vegetables and fruit.

Bathroom
Choosing between a bath and a shower is, of course, a personal choice, but a shower remains the safest option as the water drains away so reducing the risk of drowning. Level access or walk-in showers are the best option and sitting on a padded shower seat under the shower may minimise the risk of falling. Thermostatically controlled taps are also recommended.

A shower curtain rather than a screen or door might make it easier for someone to get to you in an emergency. Non-slip shower mats are also recommended.

If you choose to have a bath, do so while someone else is around so that help is at hand. Using a monitor might make it easier for someone outside to check that all is well while also giving you your privacy. Don’t lock the door – you can always hang an engaged sign on the door. And singing loudly is a sure sign that all is well.

Ensure the water is not too hot by running the cold water first. That way, if you have a seizure and fall in you won’t scald yourself. Don’t fill the bath more than a few inches deep and use a floating bath plug.

You could think about sitting in the bath on a non-slip mat and pouring water over yourself or using the shower on the mixer taps.

Floor tiles made of rubber or other soft material may be safer than hard or polished floors. If you need a grab rail, try a Prima rail which has a softer surface than mainstream rails (www.homecraft-roylan.com).

Garden
Avoid rough/concrete surfaces, uncovered ponds, prickly shrubs and hedges. Use plants, shrubs and rubber matting to cover hard surfaces. Keep a strong netting over ponds. If you experience auras, find a safe area to retreat to. Use powered mowers with care, avoid flexes and use equipment with automatic circuit breakers.

FIRST AID AND EMERGENCIES
Keep a first aid box handy and explain to friends and family what to do if you have a seizure. First aid and information about epilepsy can be downloaded via Epilepsy Society’s app (www.epilepsysociety.org.uk/digital).

Keep a list of emergency contacts handy with a description of your seizures and what should be done if you have a seizure. Think about a ‘keepsafe’ key box for house keys to be kept securely outside for use by emergency services or an identified key holder.

Wear a MedicAlert bracelet or necklace with immediate access to your details.

Keep a list of emergency contacts handy with a description of your seizures and what should be done if you have a seizure.
ALARMS

You may like to consider a safety aid or alarm that will notify friends, family, carers or emergency services if you have a seizure or a fall.

Telecare alarms

Telecare means ‘care delivered from a distance’ for people living in their own homes and in many ways is a step forward from the community alarms that were introduced in the ‘60s and ‘70s.

Community alarms with pull cords or panic buttons are still popular and work by sounding an alarm so carers know that something has happened to the person using it. However, research shows that they are not always easy to access in emergencies. People may be reluctant to use them, often fearing they may end up in hospital or simply choosing not to sound the alarm because they don’t want to trouble others.

In recent years these issues have played a part in the development of telecare in the form of so-called ‘smart sensors’. Smart sensors are designed to detect specific dangers, for example a seizure, fall or the fact that someone may have stopped breathing. The sensor will detect the danger, activate itself automatically without any input from the person using it and sound the alarm.

How does the alarm work?
The sensor can be linked by a phone line to a monitoring centre. When the person using the seizure alarm has a seizure the sensor recognises the change in heart rate or breathing pattern and alerts the centre. The monitoring centre can then make a call directly to the person to check if they are alright.

If there is no response an operator at the centre can call a family member, friend, warden or an ambulance. Usually the person using the alarm decides who they would like to be contacted in the event of an emergency.

What alarm sensors are available?
There is a wide choice of sensors that can be used. Some, such as bed seizure alarms, are designed specifically for people with epilepsy. These are placed under the mattress and can detect when someone starts to have convulsions (jerking and shaking). Some can detect moisture in the bed or even pick up a sudden noise for those who tend to cry out during their seizures.

Other sensors detect if someone falls in their home or garden. The fall alarm is a small box that can be worn on a waist belt and detects any sudden movements that may be related to a fall. In the event of a fall a carer can be alerted and come to the person’s aid.

Other sensors can detect if someone has fallen out of bed or forgotten to switch off the cooker. These alarms can either let carers know about the fall or just switch off the cooker. There are also medication dispensers which can remind the owner about medication at the right time and if necessary call them to find out what has happened.

How can I get an alarm?
There are different ways of obtaining alarms. Often the quickest way is to contact one of the companies that produce telecare equipment (see opposite). They can usually advise on what would be the most suitable product for someone. A bed seizure alarm can cost between £170-£600 + VAT depending on the company and product. In some areas, telecare systems might be available on the NHS so it is always worth asking your GP.

It may also be possible to get an alarm through your housing association or social services. You can ask your social services for an ‘assessment of needs’.

There are also charities and funds that can help such as Turn2us, an organisation that can help you search for funding.

MORE INFORMATION

The following companies produce a range of safety alarms and systems. Epilepsy Society does not endorse their products. Other companies may provide similar products.

Aremco
01622 858 502

EasyLink Electronics
www.easylinkuk.co.uk
01536 264 869

Safety Systems Distribution Ltd
www.safetysystemsdistribution.co.uk
0800 328 2950

Sensorium
www.sensorium.co.uk
0800 056 5454

Tunstall Group Ltd
www.tunstallgroup.com
01977 661 234

Turn2us
www.turn2us.org.uk
Helps you access benefits and grants.

Disability Living Foundation
www.dfl.org.uk
Information on safety products.

To find out more and to access our full range of leaflets go to www.epilepsysociety.org.uk/safety

epilepsy society
helpline

01494 601400
Monday to Friday 10am to 4pm
Confidential. National Call Rate.

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